

JUDGE SAYS SMUGGLER'S GENEROSITY A FACADE
BY JOEL RUTCHICK
ST. PAUL, MINN.

The judge who sentenced Joseph Ramirez to 20 years in prison for smuggling cocaine from Latin America wasn't impressed by the millions Ramirez lavished on the tiny town he adopted as his home.

"It is too bad that as a facade for this criminal conduct you chose to visit your tainted largess on the trusting people of Princeton, Minnesota," Judge Edward Devitt said Tuesday as he sentenced Ramirez.

"Even your winsome ways cannot mitigate the seriousness of your crimes," Devitt said.

Ramirez, 37, lavished Princeton with \$2.5 million in gifts that included two police cars, palm trees for city hall, \$1 million in interest-free loans, funds for an indoor hockey rink and airport renovations worth \$500,000.

Ramirez was always vague about his background and claimed at various times to hold a wide range of jobs ranging from CIA agent to gynecologist.

That air of mystery did not impress Devitt who also fined Ramirez \$50,000 for masterminding a multimillion-dollar Latin American cocaine smuggling operation. "You are not a 'mystery man' any more," he said.

Ronald Meshbesher, Ramirez's attorney, asked Devitt for leniency because of what Ramirez did for Princeton; a city of 3,100 people about 35 miles north of Minneapolis.

"There was hardly anyone who was not touched by his kindness," Meshbesher said. "Senior citizens at retirement homes were treated like kings and queens."

But prosecutor John Lee contended Ramirez used his wealth to disarm people.

"It's true Mr. Ramirez has touched many lives," Lee said. "It is equally true tht 400 pounds of cocaine has touched many lives."

U.S. Customs agents found 397 pounds of cocaine aboard a Cessna airplane abandoned on Grand Bahama Island last year. The government said Ramirez and his associates ditched that plane to avoid Customs aircraft.

That amount of cocaine sold by the gram could be worth as much as \$90 million on the street, depending on its purity, said John Gundersen, an official of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension.

Authorities contend Ramirez used the private taxiway he built at the airport as a base for his cocaine smuggling operation from the spring of 1981 through April 1983. Ramirez, who first visited Princeton nine years ago, bought the land for his taxiway from the city a couple of years ago.

Princeton Mayor Faith Zwemke said she wasn't surprised at the conviction in part because Ramirez never explained his source of wealth.

He claimed at various times he was a whiskey salesman, gynecologist, professional tennis player and CIA agent, court documents showed.

Ramirez still faces charges of concealing large amounts of taxable income, but plans to appeal his conviction for drug smuggling, Meshbesher said.